



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

# What a Trump Presidency Means for the Palestinian Cause

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Feb 2017

## What a Trump Presidency Means for the Palestinian Cause

Series: Assessment Report

Policy Analysis Unit – ACRPS | Feb 2017

Copyright © 2016 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. All Rights Reserved.

---

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is an independent research institute and think tank for the study of history and social sciences, with particular emphasis on the applied social sciences.

The Center's paramount concern is the advancement of Arab societies and states, their cooperation with one another and issues concerning the Arab nation in general. To that end, it seeks to examine and diagnose the situation in the Arab world - states and communities- to analyze social, economic and cultural policies and to provide political analysis, from an Arab perspective.

The Center publishes in both Arabic and English in order to make its work accessible to both Arab and non-Arab researchers.

### **Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies**

PO Box 10277

Street No. 826, Zone 66

Doha, Qatar

Tel.: +974 44199777 | Fax: +974 44831651

[www.dohainstitute.org](http://www.dohainstitute.org)

## Table of Contents

Introduction	1
The US–Israel Relationship	1
The Peace Process and What to Expect under President Trump	3
The US Embassy to Israel: a Move to Jerusalem?	4
Settlements	5
Conclusion	6



## Introduction

The world has been anxiously waiting to learn more about the foreign policy of the new White House incumbent, Donald Trump, who has yet to enunciate a coherent vision for the United States' international relations. Those opinions which Trump has voiced thus far—including those relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—stand out for being enigmatic. At various times, the new President of the US has taken wildly contradictory stances on this most visible of world issues. He has presented himself as the man best qualified to bring about peace in the Middle East, promised impartiality, and even conceded that the Israelis did not want peace. However, Trump later reinvented himself as the champion of the Israeli extreme right, vowing to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem (an oft-repeated promise in US presidential elections) before renewing his commitment to bringing about peace. Trump even appointed his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, as his special envoy to the Middle East.

This paper will offer a survey of current affairs to date, and predict what Trump's policies towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict will be, focusing on four specific points: the US-Israel relationship; the Israeli settlement enterprise; the question of moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem (thereby recognizing Israeli annexation of the city); and the question of direct political negotiations with the Palestinian political leadership.

## The US–Israel Relationship

By the standards of American politicians, Trump did not bring any pro-Israeli bona fides with him to the White House, as could be seen from his presidential campaign. The only thing which the Republican nominee was able to use to boost his electability to pro-Israeli acolytes was some dusty awards from American Zionist organizations. This included the 1983 "Tree of Life Award", granted by the Jewish National Fund, his participation in the 2004 Salute to Israel Parade in New York, and a 2015 award from a conservative American Zionist organization. Added to these is the especially close

personal relationship which ties the new president with the sitting Israeli prime minister, whose 2013 election campaign Trump supported in an online video<sup>1</sup>.

Despite this, and the new president's perfunctory proclamations that he "loves Israel", Trump's failure to formulate a clearly pro-Zionist stance gave rise to weariness among politically active American Jews, and particularly Jewish Republicans. This was not helped by Trump's declaration during a public debate in the midst of the Republican primary that he wanted to be impartial in the Middle East<sup>2</sup>. A few months previous to that, in an interview with the Associated Press, Trump seemed to place the burden of peace in the Middle East on Israel<sup>3</sup>. By the time that Trump could be firmly pinned down on Israel in the election, it only served to make an already weary Jewish American electorate only wearier and confused<sup>4</sup>.

Yet Trump's stances would ultimately evolve into something more resolute and firmly pro-Israeli. By the time he addressed the AIPAC Annual General Meeting in March 2016, then-candidate Trump declared that, "When I become president, the days of treating Israel like a second-class citizen will end on day one"<sup>5</sup>. In the same speech, Trump vowed to recognize Jerusalem as the "unified and eternal capital" of Israel, and to move the US Embassy to Israel to the city from Tel Aviv. Additionally, Trump pledged that, if elected president, he would promptly meet with Netanyahu, someone who Trump has

---

<sup>1</sup> Brian Schaefer, "Where does Donald Trump stand on Israel?", *Haaretz*, November 10, 2016, available online: <http://www.haaretz.com/world-news/u-s-election-2016/1.720213>

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Scott, "Trump pledges to be 'neutral guy' in Israel-Palestinian negotiations", *CNN*, February 19, 2016, available online: <http://cnn.it/1ouuBGm>

<sup>3</sup> See "Trump Says He Has 'Real Doubts' Whether Israelis, Palestinians Want Peace", available online via *Haaretz*, December 3, 2015: <http://www.haaretz.com/world-news/1.689909>

<sup>4</sup> William Booth, "Netanyahu to meet Donald Trump in Israel this month", *The Washington Post*, December 9, 2015, available online: <http://wapo.st/2jJNW19>

<sup>5</sup> Read the transcript of the speech at *TIME*, available online: <http://time.com/4267058/donald-trump-aipac-speech-transcript/>

known “for many years” and with whom he will be able to “work closely together to help bring stability and peace to Israel and to the entire region”<sup>6</sup>.

Trump’s speech at the AIPAC Annual General Meeting was a turning point, beyond which his stances on the Middle East were increasingly identified with the Israeli right. The new president has been outspoken in support for the present-day, zealous and militant Israeli cabinet, expressing unconditional backing for Israel and its settlement project in the Occupied West Bank, and even breaking with decades of US diplomatic norms by attacking the outgoing Obama administration’s decision not to veto UN Security Council Resolution 2334 which addressed the Israeli settlement project. The first sign that Trump’s commitment to the Israeli government had survived his election came on the second day of his presidency, in a phone call to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu<sup>7</sup>.

## The Peace Process and What to Expect under President Trump

One aspect of Trump’s anticipated policy towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that is most shrouded in mystery will be his administration’s approach to the peace process, and what the ultimate aim of the long-stalled negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians should be. Statements from the new White House staff appeared to support the position of the Israeli government in affirming that Middle East peace was only possible through direct negotiations between the Palestinian and Israeli political leaderships (effectively allowing the Israeli side to leverage its superior military and political strength in the discussions without hindrance, and unfettered by international law). Nonetheless, Trump is on the record as having expressed his desire to be “the one who made peace with Israel and the Palestinians, that would be such a great

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See “Readout of the President’s Call with Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel,” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, January 22, 2017, available on: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/01/22/readout-presidents-call-prime-minister-netanyahu-israel>

achievement”<sup>8</sup>. It is worth pointing out that at least three senior Trump appointees, including Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defense James Mattis and UN Ambassador Nikki Haley, are proponents of the creation of a Palestinian state as an eventual aim of the peace process<sup>9</sup>. Trump’s dubious choice of his son-in-law as peace envoy, however, has raised eyebrows, due to his complete inexperience and his family’s long-standing material support for Israeli settlements. These views are shared by Trump’s appointed Ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, a proponent of the Israeli annexation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem<sup>10</sup>. In the end, many observers predict that Israeli-Palestinian peace will take second place to other foreign policy priorities for the new White House, including in particular the battle against ISIL and dealings with Iran<sup>11</sup>.

## The US Embassy to Israel: a Move to Jerusalem?

A day before his inauguration, Trump reaffirmed his commitment to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem, before warnings from high-ranking American diplomats and allied governments in Europe and in the Arab region forced him into a more cautious approach. Warned by those officials and allies that such a move would inflame tensions across the Arab region, Trump was forced to preserve US interests by backtracking on the moving of the Embassy. White House Spokesman Sean Spicer suggested in comments to the media that the Trump administration had yet to come to a firm

---

<sup>8</sup> See Michael D. Shear, Julie Hirschfield Davis and Maggie Haberman, “Trump, in Interview, Moderates Views but Defies Conventions”, *The New York Times*, November 22, 2016, available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/22/us/politics/donald-trump-visit.html>

<sup>9</sup> Michael Wilner, “Obama warns Trump on Israel”, *Jerusalem Post*, January 18, 2017, available online: <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Obama-warns-Trump-on-Israel-478879>

<sup>10</sup> Justina Crabtree, “President Trump and the US Embassy in Israel: What’s going on?”, *CNBC*, January 23, 2017,

<sup>11</sup> Alan Johnson, “What will Jared Kushner and Donald Trump’s Middle East look like?”, *CNN*, January 18, 2017, available online: <http://cnn.it/2jRGmQ>

decision on moving the US Embassy<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, some indicators suggest that even the Israeli government, unprepared to deal with the potential fallout and keen not to distract attention away from the containment of Iran, is itself not overly eager to implement this oft-promised move. Israeli sources suggest that Netanyahu did not use his first telephone conversation with President Trump to push the issue.

Nonetheless, it does seem that the Trump White House wants to follow through with its declared plan, albeit through gradual steps. Legally, any move would have to wait at least until June, in line with an Obama administration directive signed in December 2016, and which officially delayed the move—a formality in place since 1995. In the meantime, a number of other alternatives present themselves as arrangements for the US diplomatic mission to Israel, including establishing the Ambassador’s residence in Jerusalem while maintaining the Embassy in Tel Aviv, or by allowing the Ambassador to conduct his business from either the US Consulate in (West) Jerusalem or at another location in the occupied city.

## Settlements

In the words of Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem, Meir Turgeman, a Donald Trump presidency meant that “the rules of the game have changed”, when it comes to Israeli settlement expansion. The indications are that, unlike the two Obama administrations, settlements will not be a bone of contention between the Trump White House and the Israeli state. Israel has already signaled its confidence of relations with a Trump White House by announcing the construction of 550 new settlement units in East Jerusalem on the very day of Trump’s inauguration—a move which had been postponed until Obama had served out his term. Some of the most extreme elements of Netanyahu’s ruling coalition, including the Minister of Education Naftali Bennet-led Jewish Home party, view Trump’s election as an opportunity to annex the Maale Adumim settlement bloc, in the east of the West Bank, to the Jerusalem Municipality. Such a move would make the birth of a geographically contiguous Palestinian state completely impossible.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ian Fisher, “Trump Presidency is Already Altering Israeli-Palestinian Politics”, *The New York Times*, January 22, 2017, available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/22/world/middleeast/israel-benjamin-netanyahu-jerusalem-maale-adumim-donald-trump.html>

It seems obvious that the Trump administration is prepared to turn a blind eye to decades-old American policy and not interfere in the expansion of Israeli settlements. The Israeli peace movement, which has long been relegated to documenting the ever-expanding settlements, has no friends in the new White House.

## Conclusion

Although the details of the incoming president's policies remain sketchy, nobody can doubt that the impact of a Trump presidency is going to ripple through the Palestinian cause and the region more broadly. On specific issues such as the moving of the US Embassy to Jerusalem and illegal Israeli settlements, the new administration in Washington looks set to upset the status quo. They are doing this at a time when the Palestinian cause is beginning to regain some of its centrality to the global discussion—for example, at global venues such as the United Nations.

At this point, the greatest mistake the Arabs could commit would be to ignore or downplay the immense support which the new American president is offering the Israeli right and its settlement project. To do so would be to forfeit one more vehicle for expanded Iranian influence in the wider Middle East, at a time when US-Iranian tensions under Trump will drive Tehran to look for new arenas to take the conflict with America.